TWO LETTERS,

ON THE

STATE OF THE NEGROES

IN THE

WEST INDIES,

BY

JOHN FOSTER. of Brickhill near Bedford a Magistrate of that County and a considerable Jamaica Proprietor.

Bedford:

PRINTED BY J. WEBB, BINDER, BOOK AND MUSIC-SELLER, &c.

1824.

XHL 710.F81T

To the Editor of the Globe and Traveller,

Of December 9th, 1823.

Sir,

Perhaps I may be assuming too great a liberty in venturing a few remarks on the leading article of the *Globe and Traveller* of 1st. Dec. If impartiality, however, is, as I have no reason to doubt, one of the characteristics of your paper, of which I have been a reader for very many years, always with interest, and for the most part, though with some exceptions, with acquiescence in sentiment, you will, by the insertion of the following, admit the claim of *audi alteram partem.*

It is the fashion of the day, and may flatter popular feeling, to decry the West Indians—they are the butt of whoever wishes to exercise his spleen. That interest is indeed, independent of the imminent peril in which its existence stands, peculiarly depressed. But though experience shows, that in all countries the refuse of the population delight in exulting over the unfortunate, one would have

thought that the dignity of a well-conducted publication, would have refrained from what might bear the appearance of similar conduct.

Let me, in the first place, premise, that I fully approve the strong, and not generally known enactments of the Jamaica Assembly, for the protection of the blacks from oppression; and sincerely wish, that if any thing were wanting, to make such protection more complete and more efficient, it might be supplied by any safe and judicious means, in this and all our other Islands. Farther, that from the first hour when the abolition of the Slave Trade was proposed, to the present one, I was the well-wisher, and, as far as my limited means go, the advocate of that measure. But I know not in what country upon earth the laws would visit the present generation, for sins committed a hundred years before they were born, with privation of property, and with danger to the lives of many of them. Such would be, and in part has been, the effect of only agitating the question called emancipation; but which, in fact, would be plunging countries hitherto peaceful, happy, and contented, into all the endurances of starvation, civil war, brutality, and assassination—a proceeding of which the dictate is hypocrisy; the means, delusion; the result, wide spreading desolation and murder. It is paying too dear a price to procure a temporary burst of popular applause, and a reputation of sanctified benevolence for a few pharisaical associates, to immolate hundreds of lives, as has already happened at Demerara; and probably, ere this, or shortly, thousands more elsewhere: to exchange a state of tranquility, of mutual good will and good offices, for horrors, perchance, far more appalling than those which for years desolated Domingo, and purpled its streams with blood.

But to come more immediately to the subject of the article I would reply to. Gentlemen sitting at their printing-offices in London, may think themselves qualified to counsel the West Indians, that the cultivation by slaves is expensive. Fortunate indeed, as well as desirable would it have been for the latter, if slavery had never existed, and had their predecessors vested their capitals elsewhere, and had not been lured to the sacrifice of them, by the encouragement and instigation, not of their own Assemblies, but of the British Legislature. That Negroes are expensive, they know to their cost. And why? Because they do not suffer them, like millions of our fellow subjects, to drag out a miserable existence, almost naked and houseless, in an inclement climate, upon such remnant of a precarious crop of oats or potatoes, as the middleman or tithe-proctor may spare to them; because they do not, when aged or feeble, or no longer wanted, imprison them in loathsome workhouses, or, when in fault, in pestilential penitentiaries; because they do not, as in the Highlands of Scotland, so soon as more profit is hoped for in some other way, dilapidate habitations, expel their inmates from house and home, to perish in some ship crowded like a Guinea vessel, or, if they reach land, upon some inhospitable desert. But because they provide Negroes with land as much as they wish for, allowing time sufficient for its cultivation; because they rejoice to see them possessed of property and cattle, and blessed with every comfort; because clothing and food at all times, and particularly during dearth, are regularly provided, even almost beyond the means of the proprietor; because medical aid, at the cost of £. 100 yearly on considerable estates, and accommodations for the sick are supplied; because no

one in decrepitude, or childhood, or old age, is left to want; because less labour is expected from three negroes than is here performed by one white man.

Far from being, from principle attached to slavery, the Proprietors readily emancipate deserving negroes, for a just compensation for the cost of bringing them up.

Now, as to the relation between the Parent Country and these Colonies:—It were ungrateful to deny that it is mutually advantageous, or at least has been so; but to whom most? From the imports thence, England derives a clear revenue of several millions; there is a certain vent for no inconsiderable portion of manufactured goods. Ignorant indeed, would that statesman be, who does not perceive that Colonies and Commerce are closely connected, that both are the nerve of naval power, and indispensible for preserving the independence of an insular State, from subjection to nations incomparably more extensive, and abounding in internal resources.

Without these Colonies, their products must chiefly be paid for to foreigners, with the loss not only of the attendant commerce and shipping, but with an annual drain of capital that would quickly tend to impoverish us. With the Colonies, not only a necessary article is abundantly and cheaply provided, but an influx of wealth is poured into the country by the exportation of part. As to the mimic of sugar coming from the East Indies, it is only fit to impose upon unwary purchasers, who look at colour only, without regard to intrinsic quality. There were sufficient reasons for a duty much higher than the prssent one, were it only to

protect the buyers from wasting their money on a worthless powder. It would be as right to guard against it, as against spurious beer.

On the other hand—to return to the question of mutual advantage, the Planter of late years has employed his capital and labour for the public rather than for himself. It is known that many estates do not bear out their expenses; and fortunate are those, who derive as great a portion of clear profit as the tithe-owner does from a field of corn not his own.

In writing about sugar at three-pence a pound, do you not know, Sir, or do you wish to keep out of view, that the revenue takes virtually more than this, by a duty, the minimum of which is 27s. per cwt. levied upon a greater weight than the purchasers pay for, no matter whether the purchaser pays or fails—in which latter case, duty, expenses, and cost are all involved! The duty is thus, in fact, more than three-pence—the import and selling expenses one penny—and reckoning the cost of production at only two-pence, then, at 60*s*. per cwt. scarcely four shillings per cwt. remain to the grower. Is not this almost confiscation!

If our Planters did not bring sugar to market as low as it can be grown any where, exportation of raw sugar could not take place. That man is the real enemy of the black population who would bring the proprietors to poverty. Then there would be universal distress there indeed—not fictitious, but real! Supplies of all necessaries must cease, and in the populous smaller islands thousands must perish by hunger.

The West Indian islanders are, and ever wish to be, most loyally attached to the Mother Country. They trust they are appreciated, and will be protected, by a great majority in Parliament, and by Ministers. Should opposite counsels ever prevail, let it be remembered what have been the results in Spain, to Portugal, and to England, from driving colonists to despair.

TO

The PRESIDENT, *at the late* MEETING *of the* PLANTERS, MERCHANTS, *and* PERSONS *otherwise interested in the* WEST INDIAN COLONIES.

SIR,

As the ably-worded and unexceptionable Petition, agreed to at our late Meeting, comprised only an assertion of our right to our properties, or to a compensation for them, I was led to infer that much debate upon the general question might be considered rather out of place. It also occurred to me, that to argue a contested question in the absence of the adverse party, might not be the most manly course, and that it might be said, that victory was easy, where there was no opponent. These considerations, together with a misgiving, attendant upon an attempt to address so respectable an assembly, induced me to refrain from soliciting its attention for a few minutes, as I had previously intended. At the same time, the remark made by one of the speakers, that we have hitherto been too remiss, and far behind our antagonists in industry, and in attracting the public ear, struck me as well grounded. They have fully availed themselves of the antipathy to the very word—Slavery—which naturally prevails

every where, but most in this happily free country. At the same time, it might not be difficult to shew, that this is now, even more than before, the only leg their cause has to stand on; while those leading motives which should guide every public measure, justice, policy, and humanity, all plead on our side. In one way indeed, they have been but too successful, in exciting prejudice and odium against us. Active and malignant emissaries have ransacked the islands, to seek out instances of supposed or fabricated oppression or tyrrany, on the part of the proprietors or their agents. A mass of calumnies was at last conjured up, and concocted of the most unhallowed materials.

" Toad, that under the cold stone,
" Days and nights hath many a one
" Swelter'd venom————
" Adders fork, and blind-worm's sting;
* * * *
" Root of hemlock, digg'd i' the dark;
* * * *
" Add thereto a tiger's chaudron,
" For the ingredients of our cauldron,
" For a charm of powerful trouble,
" Like a hell-broth boil and bubble."

It is probable that an attempt will still be made to pour the almost exhausted dregs down the throats of the ignorant. But persons of information and impartiality now perceive, that they have wholly failed in making out a case. Some few instances of harshness may have occurred, particularly on the part of persons of colour; some atrocities were committed, though not of late years; but for the rest, to be silent about the navy and army, county or town magistrates, who lend their ear to the statements

of parish apprentices, will find that there is there, perhaps more real cause of complaint. In short, the argument of the emancipators on the score of tyranny, is about reduced to this, "*the whites, however, might have acted oppressively.*" Might? So might a man here, commit any crime, but he would be amenable to the law. In like manner, in Jamaica, a man might injure a negro, but he would be amenable to laws, and very strict ones too, enacted for their protection. [*a*]

While calumnies have been disproved, the Planters are enabled to establish, upon the concurring testimony of all unprejudiced persons best acquainted with circumstances, whether from local knowledge, or correct information, derived from those who are connected with them, that the negroes are well fed, comfortably housed, (as far as the climate and their own habits require,) moderately worked; cared for in their infancy, sickness, and age; possessed in many instances of property, in undisturbed and untaxed enjoyment; and, until the demon of disturbance was in action, attached, happy, and contented. [*b*]

[*a*] Much has been said about the evidence of Negroes not being admitted in Courts of Justice. It were to be wished that they were in a situation to give credible evidence, but they are without any defined religion, those, comparatively few excepted, who have been converted to Christianity. As little would their evidence be admissible here, without some test of veracity. A Jew may swear by the Old Testament; a Quaker's affirmation may be believed; a Mahomedan, may perhaps be believed upon his Koran. But a heathenish Negro must swear by his Obeahs, or by the little idols that stand on his chimney-piece. To what absurdities would emancipators lead us!

[*b*] Instances can be produced of estates where the Negroes have for half a century, without accession from without, not diminished, but increased. And this, notwithstanding the manumission of some, and one or two condemned by the Courts to

One instance of the liberality of the Planters ought not to be overlooked, as it is perhaps without parallel; if the price of the produce of land lowers, the cultivators find it needful to lower wages; if manufactured goods do not sell well, not only those employers who are straightened, but those who roll in wealth, reduce earnings to the lowest possible limit of human endurance. Not so the West Indian; though his means have been impaired more than those of any other class in this country within memory, amidst the privations he and his family endure, I believe I may say, (subject to correction, if wrong, from the gentlemen who care for the sending out of supplies,) that in the articles of food, clothing, and comforts for the negroes, there is scarcely an instance of reduction.

Before I proceed to a farther consideration of our main subject, I would premise, that it would be unwarranted to impute motives, other than such as are developed by facts, rather ought the most favorable construction to be put. The previously established character of some of our opponents, and I am bound to add, the public benefits they have effected, would lead us to prejudge, that they were

---

deportation to the Spanish colonies, the heaviest sentence pronounced in cases of repeated and atrocious robbery. The negroes possess a very large stock of pigs, and the more industrious, one or more cows, depastured on the estate, besides obtaining no small gains by the sale of their poultry and fruit. Some are possessed of property to the amount of £. 500 currency, and from that downwards. Those who come to Europe, unless their habits are altered by a long abode here, uniformly wish to return. As for Africa, it is the last place they would hanker after. Importation having been proved to have wholly ceased in the British Colonies, in the course of some years the Negroes will be all Creoles, and neither wish for, nor know of any other country.

actuated by piety. We should be more assured of it, if they encountered one hundredth part of the risk of property and life, to which they expose others. Some again, may have been impelled by the not uncommon ambition of doing something in the world; good, if they can, if they cannot, then mischief. In further excuse, it may be pleaded, that it is undeniable, though not very creditable to human nature, that even the burdens and horrors of war, find some little compensation in the interest taken in passing events. It is impossible not to observe the avidity with which accounts are read of cities sacked, of fleets destroyed, of battles lost and gained, of the thousands captured, wounded, and killed. So, perhaps, it may give a zest to a party at a breakfast table, when the paper brings intelligence, that here, an obstinate conflict was maintained between the whites and blacks, and that many fell on both sides; that there, the negroes were subdued, brought to trial, so many acquitted, and so many hanged. That in this place, a plantation was burnt to the ground; in that, entrance forced, and all the inmates massacred.

But to be serious. I am not aware that it was ever attempted to advocate emancipation upon any defined practicable principle of justice, though there may be some, who in declaiming about abstract theories, may flatter themselves that they emulate the stern virtue of old Romans, by crying out, "*fiat justitia, ruat cœlum,*" in a cause, where they themselves have nothing to lose. If conviction were wanting; let any one read the petition from our meeting, and then say, whether uncompensated emancipation would not be as palpable an injustice, as atrocious a robbery, as ever was, or could be committed by a public body, or by an individual.

As little could it avail to argue for the liberation of Negroes as a measure of policy. Indeed all that is attempted in this respect, with any thing like common sense, is to endeavour to make out that it would be innocious. Our patriots tell us—in guarding your honour we would not lose sight of your interests. By no means would we materially injure the body politic, or impair its strength. We mean to go no further than perhaps just—the lopping off of one leg. But every true and wise friend of the country is aware, that its naval superiority and consequent security mainly depend upon its colonies. If—which God avert—our West Indian Islands ever were to become American, what comes of either ?

The plan for emancipation then reduces itself to what may be due to humanity and benevolence. It remains then for us to consider whether such a measure would now, or soon be consistent with either; or whether those who would still persevere in urging it by the same means as hitherto, would not shew themselves utterly destitute of these qualifications. Had real substantial good been the object, or had not some infatuation amounting to blindness prevailed, different indeed would have been the course. The attempts that have been made to convert, to educate, to moralize the blacks, to induce them to habits of connubial life, might have been still more liberally aided. A beginning, neither insignificant nor unsuccessful has been made. May I be permitted here to venture a doubt, whether the christianizing of negroes would not be more successfully carried on by private or associated exertions, than by a national hierarchical establishment. It does not always follow, that where most is paid, most is done, nor would the mere erection of churches, or

reading through of the marriage service, suffice to regulate their minds and manners. At all events, West India estates are now in a situation which does not allow an option of charging them with additional encumbrance of any kind whatever. But to return from this digression. If the professed friends thought they were not doing enough for the blacks, in using means to promote their instruction and conversion, they might have endeavoured to give fuller effect to the laws enacted in the Islands for their protection. Had they thought these laws inadequate, they might have amicably conferred with the Colonial Assemblies, to whom, acting under the controul of His Majesty, or his Representative, the power of legislating for the Islands constitutionally and exclusively belongs, and who, traduced as they have been by some, have evinced not only willingness, but zeal for the attainment of the object. [c]

But as to declamations in Parliament, violent excitement of already too violent passions out of it, kindling a flame here, which must re-act, and has re-acted there, to what can this tend? For argument sake, let us suppose it possible that emancipation could proceed quietly; a thing utterly improbable, to judge from the nature of things and from all past

---

[c] If the Colonial Assemblies make a stand now, it is because they will not be dictated to by an outcry mischievously raised at home. More than this, they have always maintained that their internal legislation rests exclusively with their own Assemblies and the King or his Representative. They are aware, that however strong they may in right, in power they cannot contend with the British Parliament. Let those who now would urge Government to let force trample upon right, remember that they would furnish a precedent, which may in some shape recoil upon themselves.

experience. It has rarely happened in the former ages of the world, and least of all in the present one, that there has been a transition, even from a worse to a better state of society and form of government, without concussion and bloodshed, either external, or domestic, or both. Yet where civilization and christianity had taken deep root, when the storm had blown over, and tranquility has returned, they have again expanded, and at last the boon may have compensated for the price. How far such a result may be hoped for from Negro emancipation now, we will soon enquire into; but in the mean time, let us, I say, for argument sake, suppose that the transition had gone off quietly, and was already effected. Deprived of their services, the Proprietors would cease to possess the means or to be subject to the obligation of providing for them. Now the Negro does not own one foot of the land he occupies, nor one plank of the house he lives in. He would be without land to cultivate, without habitation, without means of maintaining such live stock as he may possess. They depend for clothing wholly, for food partially, in some places principally, on supplies sent from Europe or North America, at the cost of the Planter. The funds as well as the inducement to furnish these would cease, necessarily nakedness would be superadded to famine. Whoever knows the Negroes, ridicules the idea of their working for wages like Europeans. But supposing even they did—what becomes of orphan families, where are hospitals and skilful attendance, and medicine for the sick, where provision for the aged, or relief for the infirm. Perhaps these wretched outcasts, might not, as we read of elsewhere, be consigned to the water, or to the hollow tree.

More probably deprived of every comfort and support, homeless, naked, starving, unrelieved, life might linger to afford them leisure to frame ejaculations of gratitude towards the benign liberators who had for this rescued them from servitude. Such would be the early fruits of the labours of our philanthropists, if indeed our predictions of more immediate and more appalling evils could remain unfulfilled. [*d*]

But if what may be inferred from all past experience, if the desolations in Domingo, could leave a doubt on that score, surely what has occurred within a few months must produce conviction. No sooner had the report circulated, not of any actual measure, but merely of emancipation being discussed, than it is magnified and misrepresented to the deluded blacks—scarcely had the dawn of a period that would loosen every tie, and disorganize society, broken in, than Sicilian vespers are arranging for the night. Freedom and massacre are to walk hand in hand. The dagger is to be pointed at the employer by the most trusted, indulged servant. A man's assassins are to be those of his own household. If the first

---

[*d*] America, where liberty is more highly appreciated than in any other country, has not ventured to emancipate the Negroes in the Southern States. Yet there the danger would be as nothing, compared to the West Indies, considering the vast disproportion of the two classes of population in the latter, while in North America, the numbers of Blacks could never be formidable to the state, though they might be mischievous to individuals. It has been said, (I vouch not for the accuracy,) that the population of St. Domingo was, before the troubles connected with emancipation, about 600,000 persons, subsequently, less than 200,000. A glorious feat for philanthropic agitators; to have swept 400,000 persons from the face of the earth!

blush of the measure, the first rumor of a chance, led to machinations, and was on the point of producing results like these, what might have been expected from the consummation? Most minds would turn with horror from contemplating such a spectacle; we will hope that among the emancipators there are none, or very few, who would regard such an immolation of their countrymen a godly sacrifice.

Let it not be said we are combating a chimera. That the idea of present emancipation has been abandoned. A proposal such as that of freeing children born after the present time would, if acted upon, scarcely even afford a temporary suspension. It would in addition to every other calamity, arm the rising generation against the present one. Or in any other manner, to think of proceeding halfway, and then stopping short, would be as vain as to bid the tide of the ocean to stand still.

Here, Sir, I should have concluded, had it not been that in adding a word concerning myself, I may be speaking the language of hnndreds, who may be similarly situated, only more important members of society. As far as my confined sphere and my limited abilities have permitted, I have always been, and shall be, an advocate for civil liberty. I wish slavery had never existed on the earth, and most of all that it had never been imported into the West Indies. As it has, the remedy is difficult, and must be the work of time. In being connected with a colony where it exists, I have this consolation, that I have done nothing to aggravate, but all the little that has been in my power to mitigate it. My course is so far run, that I may begin to feel more independent of passing

events and future prospects, as individually concerned. But surely it is the desire and duty of every father of a family to endeavour if possible, to protect those he leaves behind, from those privations and humiliations which, consequent on reduced circumstances, would be more keenly felt by those, born to and educated for that station of life, which, till of late they had grounded expectations to be enabled to maintain. If persons knew what they were about in impoverishing a whole class in respectable society, perhaps the collective force of individual cases united, might be some check, and induce them to pause. I sincerely hope that those who have hitherto been zealously, perhaps unthinkingly, urging emancipation, may, if inattentive to argument, yet convinced by the evidence of events, retrace their steps. But, if heedless and reckless of consequences they are determined to persevere in the course begun, and if, unfortunately for their own reputation, unfortunately for thousands of our countrymen, but most of all unfortunately for the Negroes, they should succeed, then, let time shew whether they are not, if not intentionally, yet virtually, accessaries before the fact to spoliation, to murder, and to nameless crimes of yet darker die than those which have already too deeply stained the annals of the age in which we live.

I have the honor to be, most respectfully,

Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

JOHN FOSTER.

Webb, Printer, Binder, &c. Bedford.